

KURT RUSSELL

BY FRANK LOVECE

A Disney Kid's Odyssey From Batter's Box To Boffo Box

Kurt Russell is sitting in a corner booth at a New York art-deco deli, eating stuffed cabbage and a bowl of borscht topped by a beet the size of a softball, when the bartender asks for an autograph. "For my girlfriend, Susanne," the guy says, and then backs off, chatting with someone. Russell politely inquires if it's Susanne with an "s" or a "z." The bartender doesn't hear. Russell asks again. The bartender's still oblivious. Russell is not. He's gonna get it right, dammit. "Hey, pal!" he yells like Snake Plissken in *Escape from New York*. "Is that an s or a z?"

That instant freeze-frames Russell's whole meandering career in television and the movies. Getting it right has helped save him from a future obit that might've ended shortly after the phrase "juvenile star in several 1960s Walt Disney films." Together with his looks, gruff charm, and surprisingly extensive range, getting it right has turned him into an athletic leading man or co-lead in dramas (*Silkwood*, *The Mean Season*), comedies (*The Best of Times*, *Used Cars*), and action-adventure flicks (*The Thing*, *Escape from New York*).

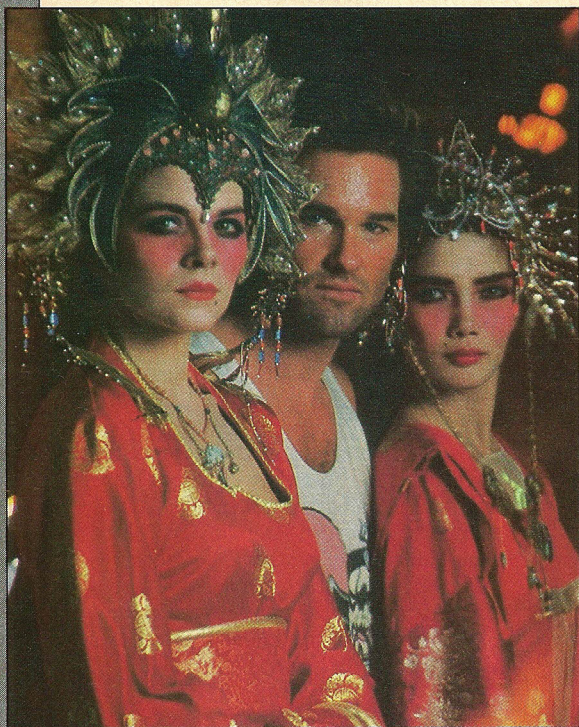
His latest movie, *Big Trouble in Little China*, is undiluted Russell. It's a high action cartoon with Russell as Jack Burton, a truck driver who discovers a mysterious labyrinth underneath San Francisco's Chinatown. "Burton cares, he's trying to help everybody out," says Rus-

sell about his character. "Snake Plissken would have said, 'Screw you.'"

Virtually all Russell's adult work, and a smattering of his early stuff, is available on video. Ironically absent are the two TV movies that took him from Disneyworld to Hollyworld: *The Deadly Tower* (1975), where he played Texas sniper Charles Whitman, and the blockbuster *Elvis* (1979), which blind-sided the critics, earned Russell an Emmy nomination, and made him, after 19 years in the business, an overnight star. "By the time I got to *Elvis*," he relates in the slangy drawl of the street-corner kid he never was, "mentally I was prepared to blow it out. I said I'm doin' this exactly the way I wanna do it. If nobody likes it, tough shit, that's the way it goes—if everybody hates me, I'm gone, out of the business. But," he understates, "it didn't work out that way."

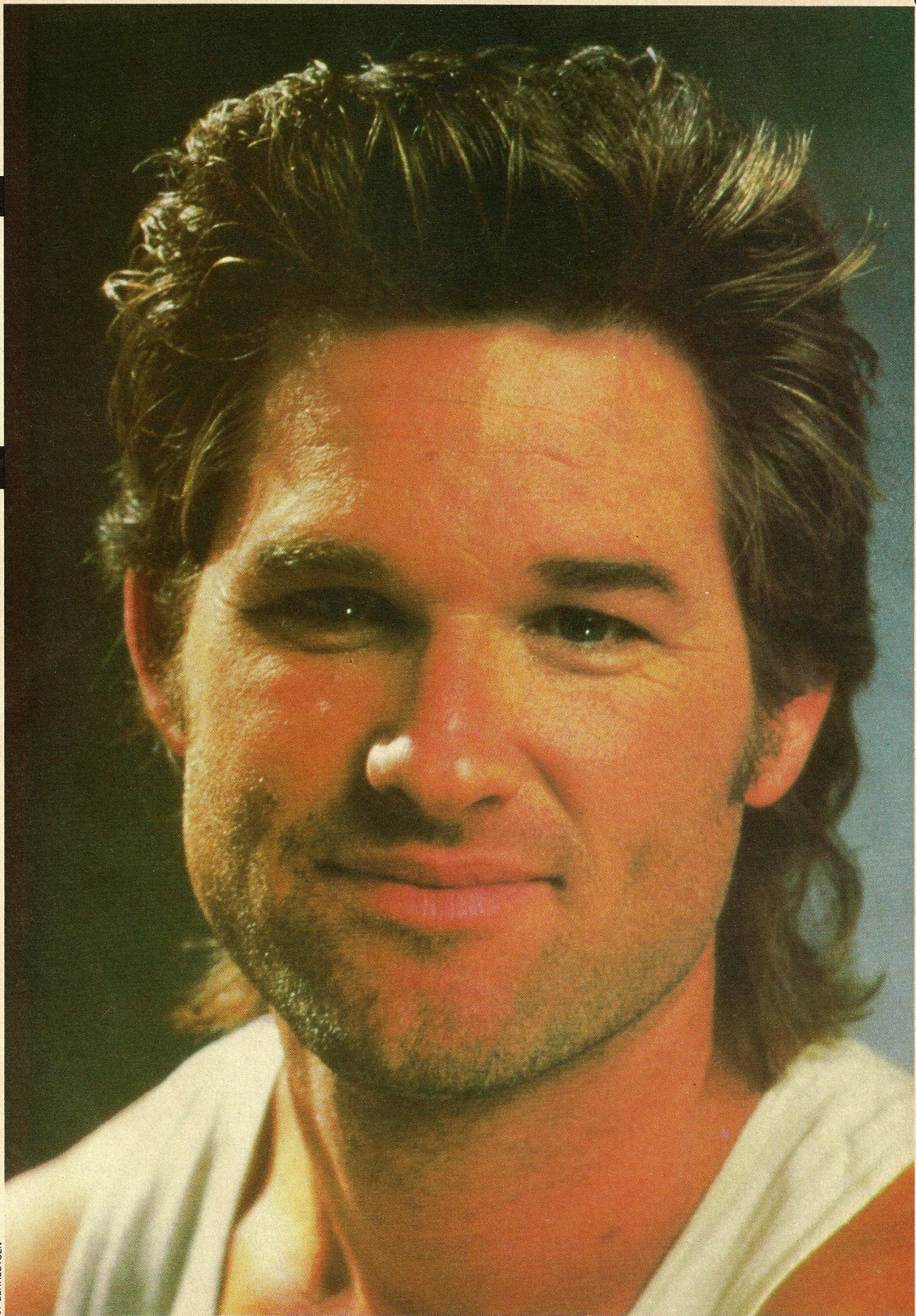
No, it didn't. Instead, Russell took over the family business and branched out profitably. He was raised in a performers' home, the son of (still-active) character actor Bing Russell. "I just went to Portland to see him play the sheriff in *Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*," says Russell fils. "When I was a kid in Thousand Oaks [Calif.], my dad was known on our block; he'd do a *Bonanza* and everybody would see it and they'd say 'nice show' or something. He's very gracious and took it all in stride. But even though he's the sort of person who enjoys a certain amount of recognizability, I knew that factor wasn't a big deal to him. I guess I got my own feelings about it from him. I realized at an early age that recognizability was not important to me. Money is, because being able to live my life the way I want to live it is. So if recognizability goes with that, you weigh what it's worth. So far, it's worth it."

Fame, money, and the subsequent



DIRCK HALSTEAD

Russell's latest, 'Big Trouble in Little China'



C. GERRESTSEN

Kurt Russell has proven equally adept in dramas, comedies and hard-driving adventure films.



Russell with Meryl Streep and Cher in 'Silkwood' (above); with Robin Williams in 'The Best of Times' (left); and with Heather North in 'The Barefoot Executive' (below).



perks weren't supposed to come from acting, but from baseball. After Russell's family moved from Massachusetts, where he was born in 1951, to Maine, and finally to southern California, he became simultaneously a child actor and a sandlot hero. He was eventually drafted into the minor leagues and, from 1971 to '74 (when a bum shoulder benched him for good), Russell spent springs and summers playing second base for the Hawaiian Islanders, the El Paso Sun Kings, and the Portland Mavericks. During the winters, he kept up an acting career that began when he was nine years old and saw that his father "was making real good money and it wasn't taking up a lot of time. I said, 'That's for me,'" he laughs.

Episodic TV wasn't exactly Shakespeare in the Park, but then, a lot of actors who've tried to make a living in television couldn't. With his father's connections and his own natural talent and smarts, Russell got work on shows from *Dennis the Menace* to *Dick Powell Theatre*. He later got to kick Elvis Presley in the shins (*It Happened at the World's Fair*, 1963). That same year, he starred in his own TV show, a wag-

on-train drama called *The Travels of Jaimie McPheeters*. "The series took me out of public school for the first time," says Russell who, like other child actors, continued his education via tutors on the studio lot. "Until then, if I did, say, two television shows a year, that might have taken five days. Later on, it would be maybe three weeks or, at the most, ten weeks a year. The rest of the time I was with my friends and going to public school and hanging out. Sometimes I'd be doing those movies during the summer when everybody else was on vacation, so they didn't even know I was gone."

Jaimie McPheeters didn't take him away from that routine for long; it was cancelled after six months, killed in the ratings by *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color*. The Disney people must have been keeping tabs on the competition—a year or so later, they offered Russell a place in their informal TV and movie repertory company. He eventually did over half a dozen

films for Uncle Walt, growing up from precocious-kid roles to nice-guy boyfriends and fiancés. Taking time off from Disney, he also filmed *Fools' Parade* (1971) with Jimmy Stewart, George Kennedy, Anne Baxter, and William Windom.

FAMILY AFFAIR

A couple of years earlier, while shooting *The One and Only Genuine Original Family Band* (1968), the 17-year-old Russell had met Goldie Hawn, a 23-year-old actress making her film debut in a small role as a dancer. Fourteen years later, on the set of *Swing Shift*, they would meet again and fall in love. This year they had a child.

"Goldie and I started having fun right from the start [of *Swing Shift*] and never stopped," says Russell, smiling peacefully. He has a son, Boston, from a previous marriage. "Having another kid now is really fun. I'm really glad. It's one of those things at our age you think about. It's a tougher decision for the gal than the guy, but it just makes you feel so good when you're comfortable with it. There's nothing that will split a home faster if it's in question than a baby; there's nothing greater for it if you're sure." Hawn and Russell, for their own reasons, aren't married and live more or less together in Aspen. Russell, a 15-year resident, is having a luxury log cabin built for the two of them. Hawn's children, Oliver and Kate, from her marriage to musician Bill Hudson, are enrolled in a private school in the area.

Russell's parallel baseball career was not anywhere near as propitious. As a player in the minors, his specialty was being traded. When his shoulder injury finally put a finish to whatever career he might have had, Russell became "shattered. Baseball was all over. Gone. I knew I had another outlet in acting, but I didn't think it would be as fulfilling. For about three years while I was playing ball, I'd sort of just gone about making TV shows and the Disney pictures. But after the injury I realized that I was gonna make a career out of the picture business, that acting really was what I did like the best. And I realized that, like in baseball, I was going to have to get into a different league. I had to become a different kind of actor than I was. I knew I could play many types of characters," he recalls, "because in life I could do that."

NEW ATTITUDE

Russell's new outlook began by affecting a Swedish accent for a short-lived TV series, *The New Land* (1974), and, except for the occasional schlock foray—a *Hollywood Squares* here, a *Battle of the Network Stars* there—it continued through several TV movies, episodic shows (including an effective *Then Came Bronson* where Russell played an injured ballplayer), and one more quick-death series (*The Quest*). "At this point I was beginning to not just take whatever jobs were offered. I was beginning to have an idea of how I wanted my career to go. I said to myself, I want to do character leads in movies." After *Elvis*—in which Russell's father played Elvis' father, and Russell's then-wife Season Hubley played Priscilla Presley—the TV utility-player was finally able to bid bye-bye to the box. His subsequent movies haven't exactly been *Star Wars* successes, but he's done well, and even when his films are panned, everybody likes Kurt.

If they hadn't, Russell swears he'd have been perfectly satisfied in some less celebrated career than acting—just so long as the pay was very good. "One of the things I liked about Reno Hightower [*The Best of*



SELECTED VIDEOGRAPHY

THE BAREFOOT EXECUTIVE

1971. Russell, Joe Flynn, Harry Morgan, Wally Cox, John Ritter; dir. Robert Butler. 95m. (G) \$69.95. Disney.

THE BEST OF TIMES

1986. Robin Williams, Russell, Pamela Reed, Donald Moffat; dir. Roger Spottiswoode. (PG-13) Hi cc \$79.95. LV cc \$34.95. Embassy.

THE COMPUTER WORE TENNIS SHOES

1969. Russell, Cesar Romero, Joe Flynn; dir. Robert Butler. (G) \$69.95. Disney.

ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK

1981. Russell, Lee Van Cleef, Donald Pleasence, Isaac Hayes, Harry Dean Stanton, Adrienne Barbeau, Season Hubley; dir. John Carpenter. 99m. (R) \$79.95. LV ST ss \$34.95. Embassy

FOLLOW ME, BOYS!

1966. Fred MacMurray, Vera Miles, Lillian Gish, Charlie Ruggles, Russell; dir. Norman Tokar. 120m. (G) \$69.95. Disney.

THE MEAN SEASON

1985. Russell, Richard Jordan, Mariel Hemingway; dir. Phillip Borsos. 106m. (R) Hi \$79.95. Thorn

NOW YOU SEE HIM, NOW YOU DON'T

1972. Russell, Cesar Romero, Joe Flynn, Jim Backus, William Windom; dir. Robert

Butler. Sequel to *Computer Wore Tennis Shoes*. 88m. (G) \$69.95. Disney.

THE ONE AND ONLY GENUINE ORIGINAL FAMILY BAND

1968. Walter Brennan, Buddy Ebsen, Lesley Ann Warren, John Davidson, Russell, Goldie Hawn; dir. Michael O'Herlihy. 110m. \$69.95. LV \$34.95. Disney.

SILKWOOD

1983. Meryl Streep, Russell, Cher, Craig T. Nelson; dir. Mike Nichols. 131m. (R) \$79.95. LV \$44.95. Embassy.

SWING SHIFT

1984. Goldie Hawn, Russell, Christine Lahti, Ed Harris; pr. Hawn; dir. Jonathan Demme. 100m. (PG) \$79.95. LV CX \$34.98. Warner.

THE THING

1982. Russell, Wilford Brimley, Richard Masur; dir. John Carpenter. 108m. (R) St D \$79.95. LV St ss CX \$29.98. MCA.

USED CARS

1980. Russell, Jack Warden, Gerrit Graham; dir. Robert Zemeckis. 113m. (R) \$69.95. LV \$29.95. RCA/Columbia.

SOURCES

For key to abbreviations and address information on video companies, see "Programming Sources" after "Directory."

Times ex-high-school football star] was that here was a guy who reached the peak of his popularity early on in life, and he wasn't bitter or regretful that he didn't have that anymore. He was comfortable just being a guy who painted vans for a living, and he was damned good at it."

The view seems romanticized, seen through the eyes of someone who's been a celebrity all his life. Russell admits that, "Sure, this is easy for me to say. But I went through it myself with baseball. I know what it feels like. And there are so many things that I really enjoy in life outside my work that I'd have been able to deal with not being known. I don't like to work, but

there are jobs that you can make plenty of money at that don't take a lot of time. I would've gone after one of those."

Kurt Russell has worked with director John Carpenter four times: on *Elvis*, which Carpenter joined after the major roles had been cast, *The Thing* (1982), *Big Trouble in Little China* (1986), and the movie that consolidated the elements of success that *Elvis* first drew together: *Escape from New York*.

Carpenter's 1981 cult classic about a near-future New York City turned maximum-security prison is a cheerfully nihilistic romp. Adorned with an eye-patch and a

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